

MINUTES OF THE TACOMA NARROWS BRIDGE TOLL SETTING MEETING
WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION
May 22, 2007

The special meeting of the Washington State Transportation Commission was called to order at 4:30 p.m. on Tuesday, May 22, 2007, at the Gig Harbor Civic Center, Community Rooms A & B, 3510 Grandview Street, Gig Harbor, Washington.

Commissioners present at the meeting were: Chair Ford, Ed Barnes, Bob Distler, Elmira Forner, Carol Moser, Dan O'Neal and Dale Stedman.

Chair Ford called the meeting to order, indicating that today's meeting will focus on public input regarding the provisions of draft rule WAC 468-270. He explained that the draft WAC is largely based on the recommendations of the Governor appointed Citizen Advisory Committee, input from the Department of Transportation and public input received so far. The Commission is required by law to set a toll that will cover expenses; the bond debt, bridge maintenance, operational costs and related activities. The draft WAC proposes that transponder tolls will be set to \$1.75 and manual tolls \$3. Vehicles with three to six or more axles will be charged per axle. Exemptions that are set forth have been controversial. He welcomed meeting participants and opened the floor for public comment.

Sergeant Kelly Busey, Gig Harbor Police Department

Sergeant Busey emphasized that the police department strongly echoes other public service agencies and the overwhelming majority of the citizenry, that tolling emergency vehicles that are on duty does not make sense. Gig Harbor is in Pierce County and therefore officers must go to the County/City Building in Tacoma for many purposes on a daily basis. The provision to seek reimbursement for emergency responses does not make fiscal sense. This amounts to a user fee paid by the citizenry to provide a public service and does not add up. The policy to apply tolls to emergency vehicles is in conflict with the existing WAC that exempts emergency vehicles when using the HOV lane. A public safety agency should not be a source of revenue. He strongly encouraged the Commission to exempt on duty emergency vehicles.

Nancy Hogan, citizen

Ms. Hogan explained that she is retired, but uses the bridge on a regular basis. These costs are expensive to fixed income families. She strongly opposes the emergency vehicle toll.

Mike Allen, citizen and police officer

Mr. Allen noted that he represents the Washington Council of Police and Sheriffs. Tolling emergency vehicles will not only effect fire departments and law enforcement agencies on a daily basis it will effect first responders around the state. The state patrol is not always available for emergencies on the bridge and local law enforcement responds.

Jim Culp, citizen

All should pay their share. The cost of the bridge is paid for entirely by tolls. If there is a deficit in the revenue collected tolls will be increased. Every vehicle should pay a share.

Gretchen Swayze-Wilbert, former Mayor of Gig Harbor

Ms. Swayze-Wilbert emphasized that elderly citizens need to get out of cars. She encourages public transportation. She inquired what the toll would be for buses.

Chair Ford

Chair Ford responded that buses with two axles pay \$1.75.

Genesee Adkins, Transportation Choices Coalition

Thanked the Commission for reaching out to the community. She expressed her appreciation of the Commission's Tolling Study. The Coalition requests that the Commission consider an exemption for transit vehicles, at a minimum for traditional buses and also potentially carpools and vanpools. The Coalition feels that people should be given an incentive to use alternative transportation. The lack of transit exemptions may set precedence for future pricing and tolling.

Senator Kilmer, 26th District

Thanked the Commission for coming to Gig Harbor to take public input. He referred to a letter that was sent to the Commission from a number of legislators regarding the first year transponder discount. During the first year of the bridge opening the old bridge will be retrofitted for approximately 10 months. During that period full benefit of the corridor improvements will not be seen, as a consequence many legislators hope to see a significant discount for transponder users to provide some relief during the period of retrofit. Moreover, there has been keen interest in seeing a transponder discount as a means of encouraging transponder use. Data indicates that between 50-60 percent of bridge users will need to use the ETC to see a congestion reduction. The transponder discount is quite important and with that in mind the Legislature appropriated \$1.3 million to enable a transponder discount, and as well provided a \$5 million backstop in case there was not significant coverage to provide the discount. The Commission is encouraged to provide the \$1.50 discount. Due to the opening of the bridge moving up the net revenue would increase about \$2 million.

Bob Black, Chief, Pierce County Fire District #5

Mr. Black indicated that he wanted to specifically address the Commission regarding the impact that tolling emergency vehicles would have. Tolling emergency responders places the community and visitors in a position of paying to provide emergency services as 85 percent of the fire districts support comes from taxes. Emergencies require that responders cross the bridge in order to return to their station. This toll system will impact responders from other agencies when they are called to assist with emergencies. Assisting agencies seldom cross the bridge except when called to a large emergency. Ambulances should be exempt when transporting patients. The vast majority of citizens support the exemption of emergency responders.

Chair Ford

Explained that any exemption from tolls will impact those that do pay. The majority of the toll payers in terms of trips taken will be residents of Gig Harbor and the surrounding area. He questioned if the citizens living in the region are fully supportive of emergency vehicles being exempt, therefore resulting in paying a higher toll. He emphasized that the Commission is offering a credit to emergency responders going to and from a bona fide emergency.

Mr. Black

Responded that the vast majority of people that he has spoken with feel that it is not appropriate for an emergency vehicle responding to an emergency to pay the toll.

Commissioner O'Neal

Responded that the issue is where to draw the line with respect to exemptions.

Mr. Black

Indicated that it would cost the fire district about \$10 thousand dollars a year for the tolls. To purchase the transponders would be a one-time cost of about \$700.

Commissioner Forner

Indicated that everyone has emergencies at one time or another and must pay the toll.

Tom Sutich, Gig Harbor Fire Commissioner

Reiterated Chief Black's position. The fire district does not have a huge budget. Whatever impacts the budget affects the safety and health of the citizens in the area.

Michael Murphy, Gig Harbor citizen

Emphasized that he is very much opposed to exemptions. Taxpayers already pay for emergency vehicles, so what if Pierce County needs to come up with some cash to fund the tolls. Everybody knows that it is Gig Harbor and points west paying for this project.

Bill Wilson, Gig Harbor peninsula resident

Indicated that he is also strongly opposed to any exemptions whatsoever on the bridge. The bridge is funded by users and it's only fair that all users pay the tolls. As you create exemptions you create the opportunity for abuse. I've heard that the proposed exemptions are compared to exemptions on ferries. This is not a good comparison, because the ferry system is funded not only by users, but by state funds as well.

Commissioner Stedman

Stated that the proposed rates are not carved in stone. The Commission will hear public comment again on June 5 and take action on a proposal at that time.

Commissioner Distler

Emphasized that there are differences of opinion amongst Commissioners on the proposal. The Commission's decision is limited for more than one reason. If in fact the Commission were to change the proposed WAC language to any substantial degree it would require an additional 30 day waiting period for public testimony and therefore delay the toll setting on the bridge.

Commissioner Barnes

Noted that the Commission is trying to make certain that the public is represented properly and that everyone is treated equally.

Commissioner O'Neal

Noted that it is important for all of us to remember that the real questions are: "Who pays?", "Who benefits?" and "How much?" In this case, should the toll payers pay, or should the supporters/owners of the transit, police or fire vehicles pay?

Sergeant Busey

As a citizen I to pay the toll and I am fine with that. It does not make sense to toll an emergency vehicle on an emergency run.

Jackie Murphy

Emergency services can add the toll on to our bill as a tax.

Chair Ford

Explained that the Commission tried to clarify the provision for emergency vehicles. Transponders are required on emergency vehicles responding to or returning from a bona fide emergency. The system is automated, and the Commission will be reviewing the data in the future to see what the impacts of the proposed credits are. There needs to be balance and still have equity.

Commissioner O'Neal

Expressed that he is concerned with the mechanics of the credit process, the bridge operation should not interfere with the necessary travel of emergency vehicles and we should not impose a heavy bureaucratic burden on those responders.

Commissioner Stedman

It has been pointed out that citizens or agencies should submit their ideas to the Commission.

Chair Ford

Pointed out that all of the data that will be collected is subject to public review.

Commissioner Forner

Expressed that the credit to emergency responders should not be turned into an administrative disaster.

Commissioner Distler

There is a very simple way for agencies to submit their claims for emergency travel credits. He assumes that it can be done efficiently by the Department. He expressed that his issue is with equity and fairness.

Sean Robinson, Reporter, Tacoma New Tribune

Requested clarification of the WSP exemption.

Chair Ford

Respond that the entire WSP is not exempted. Only those WSP vehicles that are assigned to the SR 16 corridor on or near the bridge will be exempt.

Commissioner Distler

Indicated that the only exemption on the ferry system is for those that are responding to an emergency, at the ferry system's request, on ferry property or on the vessels. There are no exemptions for ambulances or county vehicles or first responders.

Commissioner Moser

Commented that the Citizens Advisory Committee proposed the tolls to the Commission, and she believes that the Committee took citizen concerns into consideration.

There is a benefit to using public transportation when crossing the bridge.

Ms. Swayze-Wilbert

Asked if it would be possible to have an HOV lane available for emergency responders using lights and sirens, so that they could cross the bridge quickly.

Commissioner O'Neal

Responded that emergency vehicles responding to or returning from an emergency are exempt.

Carol Belleci, Citizens Advisory Committee on Tacoma Narrows Bridge Tolls

Explained that the CAC discussed exemptions during their meetings. The decision was to keep the toll as low as possible for those that use transponders. In order to do that ways of cutting administrative overhead needed to be looked at. For every exemption that is offered it requires monitoring by WSDOT. There is always abuse when exemptions are offered, and the CAC determined that with the low ETC cost exemptions would not be offered. After consideration the Committee determined to exempt emergency vehicles that are on a bona fide emergency. These responders would qualify for a credit to their account for a bona fide emergency response. WSDOT vehicles maintaining the bridge and WSP vehicles patrolling the bridge would be exempted. The CAC will review traffic counts in the future and if emergency vehicle credits are minimal they will readdress those tolls.

Chair Ford

Clarified that all maintenance costs on the bridge will be paid from the tolls. WSDOT vehicles maintaining the bridge are exempt for this reason. He recommended that all agencies involved come to the table and decide how to make all of this work. The Commission needs data to determine how to handle future toll setting. He reminded that public testimony will be heard again on June 5, 2007 in Gig Harbor.

The Special meeting adjourned at 6:00 p.m., on May 22, 2007.

WASHINGTON STATE TRANSPORTATION COMMISSION

DICK FORD, Chair

ELMIRA FORNER, Vice-Chair

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DAN O'NEAL, Member

ROBERT S. DISTLER, Member

DALE STEDMAN, Member

DOUGLAS MACDONALD, Ex-Officio Member
Secretary of Transportation

JENNIFER ZIEGLER, Governor's Office

ATTEST:

REEMA GRIFFITH, Executive Director

DATE OF APPROVAL